

Remarks of Tom Sugrue
Wireless Telecommunications Bureau
Federal Communications Commission
to the
General Membership Meeting of the Public Safety
National Coordination Committee
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(as prepared for delivery)

Thank you Michael and thanks to the NCC for inviting me back to Brooklyn this morning. There is a special significance of being in New York City at this time with events of September 11 so fresh in our mind and with the recent tragic plane crash at Rockaway.

I actually was born in Brooklyn. While I don't want to disclose how long ago that was, suffice it to say that I saw my first baseball game at Ebbets Field when the Dodgers played the Giants-- that would be the Brooklyn Dodgers against the New York Giants for any youngsters out there. My family still lives in New York, and I am pleased for the opportunity to be back in the City.

On a more serious subject, on behalf of the FCC, particularly the people in the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau, I want to commend all of you for the extraordinary work that was done to maintain public safety communications during the World Trade Center attack and in the days following.

Watching the television coverage of the airplane crash this past Monday, I realized that New York's public safety communications systems were again being put to the test. This event only underscores the need for reliable and effective public safety communications in the times such communications are most needed.

I know that the damage at the site of the World Trade Center attack had a severe impact on the City's communications infrastructure. Rescue personnel looked to the public safety communications community to restore service. Through ingenuity and hard work, communications technicians and managers were able to overcome a number of problems to provide a communications system for public safety personnel during this unprecedented tragedy. The City and the Country owe a large debt of gratitude to these communications professionals.

But, as many of you know, the public safety communications system was under extraordinary pressure in those hours immediately after the attack. The channels that were available were terribly crowded. Interoperability problems arose when responders using incompatible radio equipment in different bands were unable to talk to one another. There are lessons to be learned from this experience -- not only by those who participated, but also by us at the FCC and by Congress. I look forward to hearing the reports this morning on interoperability issues in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center.

I believe, like many others, that the 700 MHz band represents a tremendous opportunity for the public safety community. A reliable 700 MHz network infrastructure – with several interoperability channels – would be an invaluable step to cope with the communications demands of disasters of the kind we recently experienced.

The NCC was formed almost three years ago to assist in the development of operational and technical standards in the 700 MHz spectrum band. The regulatory groundwork for establishing new 700 MHz systems now is in place. The FCC has carefully analyzed the technical and operational recommendations of the NCC and incorporated most of them into our rules. Interoperability will be assured because we adopted the NCC's recommendation for narrowband voice and data standards for the interoperability channels. The first 700 MHz State licenses are going to be issued early next year. Other licenses will follow as the Regional Planning Committees submit their plans and obtain approval. One element is still missing, though. We still do not have a wideband data standard recommendation from the NCC. I understand that you will be discussing wideband data standards today, and I encourage you to complete your efforts as soon as possible.

One of the most constant concerns I hear expressed by the public safety community is that television stations should vacate the 700 MHz public safety band by 2006 or sooner. That is a legitimate concern and one that has our attention.

The FCC is working hard to make 700 MHz spectrum available in areas where it currently is constrained by television allocations. For example, we are encouraging broadcasters to vacate the 700 MHz band voluntarily and are allowing them to accept payment for doing so. However, the ultimate resolution of the 700 MHz band clearing situation is a matter not completely within the Commission's control.

Congress set a 2006 transition date by statute, but that statute allows television stations to continue to operate in the 700 MHz public safety band beyond 2006 under certain circumstances. Many in the industry believe that, if the statute remains in force in its current form, there will be very few stations that actually vacate the 700 MHz band by 2006. The establishment of a date-certain transition clearly is a matter about which Congressional review might be helpful.

On the international side, both Canada and Mexico are considering harmonizing their 700 MHz allotments with those of the United States and eventually clearing the 700 MHz band of television stations. But, presently, both countries have DTV allotments along the border that would limit use of the 700 MHz public safety spectrum in certain border states. The FCC continues to work on this issue with both Canada and Mexico.

Of course, our best efforts to clear television stations from the 700 MHz public safety band are going to be of little value unless equipment is available. With the recent issuance of the FCC's technical rules, manufacturers have the information necessary to start the design and manufacturing process. By the time we issue the first 700 MHz licenses early next year, I hope that the manufacturers will have geared up so that we will soon have equipment available from a number of sources.

An effective, hardened, and redundant public safety communications infrastructure is an essential component of our way of life. This comes at no small cost; but anything less could leave us insufficiently prepared in the times that reliable communications are most needed. Funding of public safety communications systems is something that is not within the FCC's mandate. I almost wish it were, because all of your work here is futile without the funds to implement it. Your representatives have been very effective in making your voices heard at the FCC. I suggest that in light of the events of September 11 you also make your voices heard in the offices of your state legislators and in the halls of Congress. Lawmakers should be made aware that funding is essential if we are to realize the promise of 700 MHz public safety systems.

I want to close by suggesting that many of you had more than one reason to come to New York at a time when travel is still being avoided by many Americans. When I decided to accept your invitation to come here and speak, I was reminded what Churchill said when he spoke to the English people in World War Two. In remembering the poet W.E. Henley, Churchill said that, even in the darkest days of war: "We are still masters of our fate. We are still captains of our souls." I think you all believe that. I know I do. What's more, I am convinced that in coming here, you have paid tribute to your fallen public safety comrades who lost their lives while heroically responding to the attacks on the Trade Center.

I thank you for inviting me, and I wish you all success as you continue your important work.